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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [KWWW](#) [SOCI](#) [EINT](#) [KEMS](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: CHINESE BLOGGERS FEEL INCREASING GOVERNMENT PRESSURE
BUT REMAIN HOPEFUL

Ref: a) 08 BEIJING 4522

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Classified By: Consul General Brian L. Goldbeck. Reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Chinese government has been tightening its grip on the Internet, and the trend won't be reversed any time soon, according to prominent bloggers attending the 5th Annual Blogger Conference (Septel). Bloggers viewed the role of the Internet in Chinese society alternatively as a virtual public square and a training ground for the government and people. Netizen conference goers also rallied around the fall of the Berlin Wall 20 years ago, comparing it to China's Great Firewall and their hope for its ultimate destruction. End Summary.

Feeling the Heat

12. (C) "The Internet situation in China is worsening," said Zhang Shihe (aka Lao Hu Miao, strictly protect), who was part of a panel of some of China's most well-known bloggers speaking at the 5th Annual Blogger Conference on the current state of the Internet. He said that the Internet space had become "smaller" in the last two years, and he fears that the trend will be permanent. Prolific blogger Yang Hengjun (strictly protect), another panelist, expressed similar sentiments, adding that blogging is an increasingly dangerous activity in China.

13. (C) In a separate meeting, Yang told ConGenOff that the Chinese government's control of the Internet had become much tighter in the last two years, particularly since the lead up to this year's National Day on October 1. Chinese Internet users account for almost 25% of the population, and should thus be considered a form of mass media, said Yang. Therefore, he argued, the Chinese government is beginning to feel an urgency to strengthen its control. Yang believes that the recent tightening is not a temporary policy, but will be long-term because the Chinese government has continued to take measures to further censor Internet content. According to Yang, his writings no longer appear on the first page of chat rooms and other websites as they have in the past. Consequently, his writings have gone from receiving 1 million

hits a day to around 35,000 hits, he explained. Other attendees noted that their hope for post-October 1 National Holiday loosening of online censorship had not materialized.

14. (C) Conference organizers Wen Yunchao (aka Bei Feng, strictly protect) and Mao Xianghui (aka Isaac Mao, strictly protect) pointed to China's current political situation as the reason for the Chinese government's Internet clamp down. Specifically, Wen said the Chinese government feels that it does not have a good handle on society. Mao added that the government recognizes and fears the strength of the social force that can be generated through the Internet. David Feng (strictly protect), a longtime conference participant, also pointed to the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and significant anniversaries in 2009 as reasons for the government's harsher line. He expects little to change in the next two years given the November Asian Games in Guangzhou and the May to October World Expo in Shanghai in 2010.

Hot on the Trail of the Censors

15. (C) The more outspoken bloggers attending the conference said their sites were closely observed by the Chinese government censors, and they had a good sense of which comments posted to their blogs were authored by the so-called "fifty-cent club." (Note: The "fifty-cent club" refers to people hired to write pro-government comments on the Internet. They are reportedly paid fifty "Chinese cents" (i.e., one-half of one renminbi) per post. (ref a) End note.) According to Mao in a separate conversation with ConGenOff, many bloggers believe that one group of censors is headquartered in Beijing's Chaoyang District where approximately 60 people work

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around the clock to monitor, block, or delete certain Internet content. Mao believes that the head of this operation is the president of Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications. Mao said that netizens often received tips from the censors themselves on how to avoid Internet censorship. (Comment: Mao's description likely only accounts for a small portion of the mechanisms charged with censoring the Chinese Internet. We have not been able to independently confirm Mao's claim about the censorship unit in Chaoyang, nor the Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications president's involvement. End Comment.)

Internet Connects and Enlightens People

16. (C) The Internet is the virtual "square" where citizens can gather and collectively voice their opinions, said Yang Hengjun during a meeting with ConGenOff. It is a tool for freedom of speech, and many citizens can utilize this tool without having to step foot outside their house. Yang explained that the Internet enlightens not only Chinese citizens, but also the Chinese government. Through the Internet, Chinese citizens can learn about what is really happening in China and internationally. Likewise, the Chinese government reads what is posted in cyberspace and reacts to it. This is a good thing, said Yang, because it is important for the government to know what is of concern to the public. Evaluating the power of the Internet, Yang said that it had changed China dramatically in terms of law and political management. He explained that a few high-ranking officials had met with prominent bloggers to discuss current events and economic development and had drawn on policy and legislation ideas found in Internet writings. However, Yang also said that the Chinese government's control of the Internet allows the state to use it as a propaganda tool. Assessing the Chinese government's online public relations efforts, Yang said that it's doing a good job projecting a positive image. (Comment: Over the last four years, the Chinese government appears to have increased and improved its online presence

through concerted efforts to centralize and professionalize online information about governmental developments and national events. End comment.)

17. (C) For Mao Xianghui, the Internet's main role is to connect people. He points to the blogger conference as an example of the Internet bringing people with common interests together and enabling them to work towards for a common goal. People in China are beginning to realize the Internet's power, and the Internet will inevitably have an effect on government officials at all levels, said Mao.

18. (C) In a speech at the conference, Ran Yunfei (strictly protect), a blogger known for his outspoken and sarcastic style, held a more cautious view of the Internet's influence. The Internet will not immediately change Chinese society, warned Ran, but he too believes that in time, the Internet can help the Chinese government "learn to compromise" with the citizens. Ran said that as competent as Premier Wen Jiabao appears, he does not understand that public criticism is a citizen's right. Ran explained that Chinese citizens need to "train" the government, not through violence, but through law. The Chinese government is not accustomed to criticism, he argued, so it needs to be trained to accept criticism. Ran reasoned that if criticism is rationally delivered to the government by the public, the government will slowly become accustomed to it. At the same time, Chinese citizens must also train themselves to follow the law to make this process effective. Ran called the Internet a public training ground for both Chinese citizens and the Chinese government.

Berlin Wall and Great Firewall

19. (C) Bloggers at this year's conference rallied around the fall of the Berlin Wall, repeatedly comparing the event and its symbolic significance to their efforts to tear down the Great Firewall. During a panel discussion, Zhang Ping (aka

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Chang Ping, strictly protect), a celebrated blogger and former journalist, commemorated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, calling it the greatest achievement of the last century. He then predicted that the fall of the Great Firewall would be the greatest achievement of this century. Likewise, Teng Biao (strictly protect), a Beijing human rights lawyer and co-founder of Open Constitution Initiative (aka Gongmeng), which was shut down by authorities in July, compared the two "walls" and quickly won enthusiastic applause with his call to "tear down the Great Firewall." Others with whom ConGenOff spoke made similar statements. Zhang Le (strictly protect), a second-time conference participant, talked emotionally about the Berlin Wall as a motivator and a model for China's online community. He said that if the East Germans were able to risk their lives to tear down the Berlin Wall, then what does that say for Chinese citizens and their drive for freedom. David Feng, another attendee, said it was only a matter of time before "the fall of the wall" became a reality.

Chinese Bloggers Remain Hopeful for the Future

10. (C) In the final sessions of the blogger conference, Yang Hengjun had this assessment: "Writing blogs in China is dangerous, but at the same time, a beautiful thing." He concluded that if the Chinese government did not change the Internet, the Internet would change the regime. Conference organizer Mao Xianghui said that despite the Chinese government's tightened grip on the Internet, the government was also learning from the Internet. He believes that the Internet can and will change the government mindset over time, and that netizens will "win in the end." Wen Yunchao speculated that the Chinese government might pull a 180 and

cooperate with bloggers once it realizes that it cannot completely control the Internet. He said that the government might very well start viewing the blogging community as a resource and not fight it. Though some disagreed with his prediction, Wen said that it was not entirely impossible. David Feng, believing that the government would loosen its hold on the Internet in two or three years, said he was placing his hopes on Vice President Xi Jinping, whom he described as more forward thinking and practical than current President Hu Jintao.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Beijing.

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